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Antecedents and consequences of salesperson identification with the brand and company

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To date, little research has investigated the antecedents and implications of salespersons' identification with the brands and the companies they represent. As the nature of the selling job is unique from other inside employee positions, with increased independence of the firm and loyalty that may be expanded to the customers rather than the firm itself, an investigation of this phenomenon within the sales context holds significant implication for sales force management. The salesperson also represents an extension of the marketing communication programme of the firm and thus has direct bearing on how the company and brand image are communicated to the customer. Therefore, the purpose of our paper is to hypothesize and empirically test the notion that higher levels of perceived congruence between a salesperson's own values and those values of the brand and company he or she represents will lead to higher brand identification and company identification which in turn should create higher job satisfaction, commitment and performance. We discuss our results and offer practical insights to sales managers. Further, we discuss limitations of our study and provide directions for future research.

Keywords: brand identification; company identification; value congruence; sales force outcomes; salesperson performance

Previous research has examined identification as it relates to employee–company identification (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Bergami and Bagozzi 2000), consumer–company identification (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003) and sports fans–team identification (Carlson, Donovan, and Cumiskey 2009). However, little research has investigated the antecedents and implications of salespersons' identification with the brands and the companies they represent. Only recently has the topic of salesperson identification with the brand been addressed as the subject of research efforts (e.g., Badrianarayana and Laverie 2011; Hughes and Ahearne 2010). For example, Hughes and Ahearne (2010) studied the brand identification of a reseller salesperson with a manufacturer's brand, on sales effort and extra role behaviours. They also considered the moderating effects of distributor (reseller) identification and control system. Along the same lines, Badrianarayana and Laverie (2011) examined the role of retail salespeople's identification with the manufacturer's brand as an important mediator that influences brand advocacy behaviours and sales effort. Although these scholars open up this very interesting and important area of work, they acknowledge there are many other opportunities in the area, including exploration of antecedents and the need for research within a single company as opposed to reseller.

An investigation of this phenomenon within the sales context holds significant implication for sales force

management, as the nature of the selling job is unique from other inside employee positions, with increased independence of the firm and loyalty that may be expanded to the customers. As a boundary spanner, salespeople have high levels of role conflict (Singh, Goolsby, and Rhoads 1994; Singh 1998) and may have loyalties to customers and other stakeholders in addition to their own firm (e.g., Walker, Churchill, and Ford 1975). In addition, the salesperson also represents an extension of the marketing communication programme of the firm and thus has direct bearing on how the company and brand image are communicated to the customer. Brand adoption and support from internal stakeholders such as salespeople play a key role in the ultimate adoption of the brand by customers (Wieseke, Homburg, and Lee 2008). Salespeople are in direct contact with customers; customers' perceptions about the company and the brand are largely influenced by salespeople's actions and behaviours (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, and Gruen 2005; Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak 2009; Homburg, Wieseke, and Hoyer 2009). Salespeople tend to represent the brand and act as the brand ambassadors in front of external entities such as customers (Harris and de Chernatony 2001). Furthermore, brand building and sales force performance have important financial implications. Billions of dollars are spent on both brand building and a company's sales force in trying to generate sales

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for the company. While total numbers are not easily available, consider just one industry, pharmaceuticals. In 2005, \$4.2 billion was spent on direct-to-consumer advertising for pharmaceutical products (US 2006). Estimates indicate that at least \$10.8 million of this advertising expense, per brand, is spent specifically on brand building (COREBRAND 1999). Meanwhile, the pharmaceutical industry spends \$7.2 billion on direct selling to the physicians (US 2006), with over 5.5% of the cost of every prescription written covering direct sales force costs (Medical Marketing and Media 2004). While this represents only one industry example, extrapolating to all industries would show that these expenses are a significant part of business today.

Given the uniqueness of the boundary spanning role, the importance of the salesperson to the marketing communication of the brand image, and the important financial implications of both brand building and sales force performance, an investigation of generalizability of company identification and expansion of research to salesperson brand identification (SBI) becomes particularly important (Homburg, Wieseke, and Hoyer 2009). As such, our research focuses on the drivers and implications of salesperson identification with the company, and also with the brand. Based on social identity theory (SIT), we expect there is some sense of connection that salespeople feel between themselves and the brand of the products and services that they sell. More specifically, we focus on the role of brand and company value congruence in driving salesperson identification with the brand and the company and its subsequent effects on job satisfaction, commitment and performance.

Our study contributes to existing literature in the following important ways. First, although the subject of person-organization fit in terms of value congruence has been examined previously, most of these efforts have been from an organizational literature based on internal employee's perspective. In contrast, our study focuses on sales force context with its unique boundary-spanning nature. Second, most of the value congruence studies identified in the organization-person fit literature focused on a variety of overall values from an organizational point of view or used employees' overall assessment of how they perceived the values of the organization fit their values (e.g., Ostroff, Shin, and Kinicki 2005; Chatman 1989; Cable and DeRue 2002; Amos and Weathington 2008; Barnes et al. 2006). In contrast, our study focuses on using a common values model (i.e., Schwartz Values inventory) relevant from a brand and sales force perspective. Third, previous organizational research has shown that value congruence between an employee and the firm results in higher levels of organizational identification (e.g., Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, and Johnson 2005; Piasentin and Chapman 2006). By extension, one could postulate that value congruence between an employee and the brand

might result in higher levels of brand identification. Yet some interesting tensions could exist within these various sets of values (the firm's, the brand's and the salesperson's). For example, what if the salesperson identifies with either the company or the brand, but not both? Previous literature has shown that company identification impacts adherence to controls and extra role behaviour (e.g., Ashforth and Mael 1989, Mael and Ashforth 1992; King and Grace 2010), while brand identification impacts brand effort and brand performance (e.g., Hughes and Ahearne 2010; Badrianarayana and Laverie 2011). Furthermore, what if the brand and company values are not the same? This seems likely, given that many firms have multiple brands focused on different target markets, which relate to different value sets (Balmer 2001; Kapferer 2002). The study captures the influence of salesperson value congruence with both the brand and the company on subsequent identification with the brand and the company.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. First, we discuss relevant theoretical backgrounds and research. Second, we provide an overview of our model and generate our hypotheses. Third, we describe our empirical study and present our results. Fourth, we discuss our findings and offer some managerial implications. Finally, we discuss potential limitations of our study and offer some directions for future research.

Theoretical background

As we noted earlier, previous research has investigated the drivers and implications of customers' identification with brands and employees' identification with their organizations. Within the organizational context, identification has been defined as 'the degree to which a member defines him- or herself by the same attributes that he or she believes define the organization' (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994, 239). Ashforth and Mael (1989, 21) define identification as 'the perception of oneness with or belonging' to the organization. From a marketing context, Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) postulate that customers develop their sense of themselves by identifying with and associating themselves with the companies they favour. The authors further argue that customers' identification is driven by the attractiveness of the company identity and its similarity to their own identity. Furthermore, recent research efforts attempt to link employee- and consumer-company identification to important consumer outcomes and company performance. For example, Homburg, Wieseke, and Hoyer (2009) proposed and empirically supported a social identity-based path to service-profit chain in which they conceptualized employee- and customer-company identification as an important additional path to the conventional satisfaction-based service-profit chain, leading to improved customer

outcomes (e.g., loyalty, willingness to pay) and firm financial performance.

The theoretical background for identification research is SIT which postulates that in constructing their sense of the world, people categorize themselves and others into groups (Tajfel and Turner 1985).¹ Self-categorization into a group (i.e., I belong to organization X) serves as a self-definitional role. Furthermore, researchers agree that social identity is a multidimensional construct (Van Dick et al. 2004; Bergami and Bagozzi 2000; Ashforth and Mael 1989). In his seminal work on social identity, Tajfel (1978) proposed that social identity consists of three components: ‘a cognitive component (a cognitive awareness of one’s membership in a social group-self categorization), an evaluative component (a positive or negative value connotation attached to this group membership – group self-esteem), and an emotional component (a sense of emotional involvement with the group – affective commitment)’ (372). Further research identified a behavioural component as a fourth dimension of identification (e.g., Gautam, Van Dick, and Wagner 2004; Van Dick 2001), which represents behavioural tendencies in support of the group.

Later research on social identity attempted to address the conceptual confusion among the different dimensions of social identity, demonstrating that various components of group identity can be conceptually distinguished and empirically assessed (Ellemers et al. 1999; Bergami and

Bagozzi 2000). Ashforth and Mael (1989) stated that organizational identification is ‘a perceptual cognitive construct that is not necessarily associated with any specific behaviors or affective states’ (21). Mael and Tetrick (1992) argue that identification with a group is ‘perceptual rather than affective, describes only the cognitive perception of oneness with the group, not resultant behavior’ (814). Along the same lines, Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) recognized the affective and evaluative components of social identity and differentiated them from cognitive identification. Although identification has been conceptualized in different ways in the literature, in this study we adopt the Bergami and Bagozzi’s (2000) notion of cognitive identification. The authors define identification as the cognitive state in which the individual comes to view him- or herself as a member of a social entity (Bergami and Bagozzi 2000). It represents the extent to which someone perceives her/himself belong to the group and represent its members upon realizing the similarities and differences between members of the social in-group and different out-groups (Mael and Ashforth 1992).

Research propositions

Building on the extent literature we propose the relationships which are illustrated via the model in Figure 1. In summary, we expect that salesperson brand value

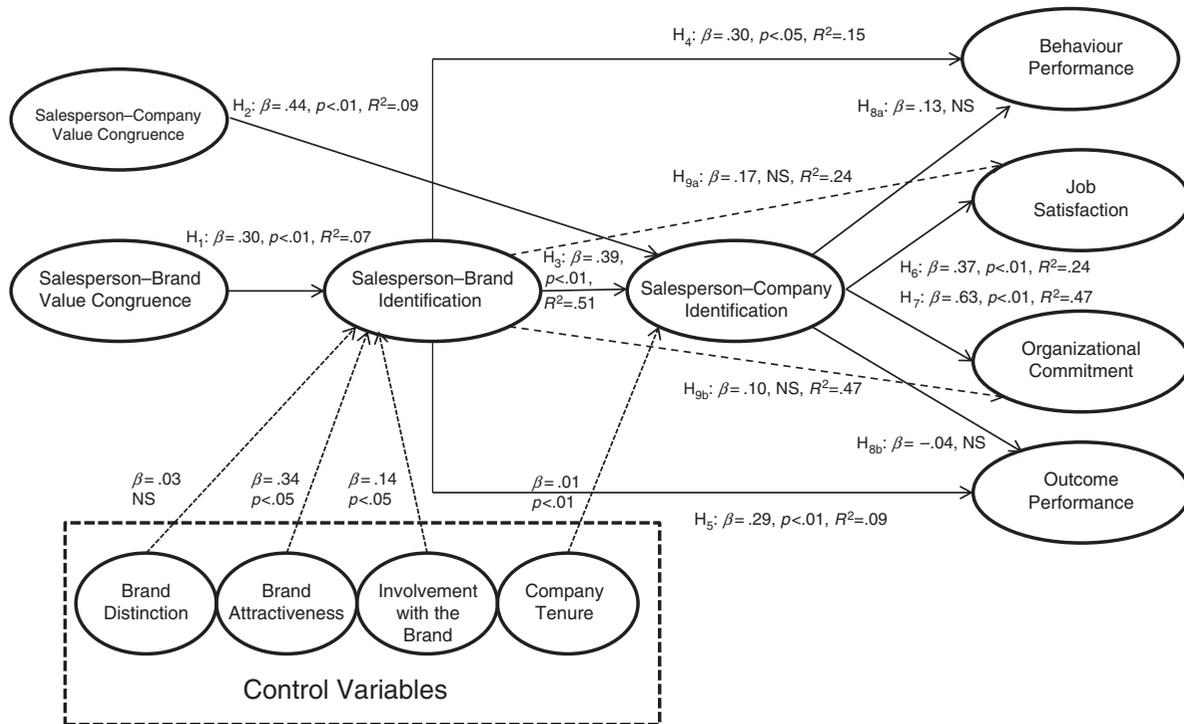


Figure 1. Antecedents and consequences of salesperson identification with the brand and company.

congruence (SBVC) will be a key driver of SBI. Likewise, we hypothesize that antecedents of salesperson company identification (SCI) will consist of both salesperson company value congruence (SCVC) and SBI. One set of consequences of our model consists of salesperson performance; more specifically SBI will be positively related to both behaviour performance and outcome performance. Organizational outcomes such as salesperson job satisfaction and organizational commitment are expected to be positively related to SCI. We also expect that the role of SCI will serve to mediate the relationship between SBI and salesperson job satisfaction and organizational commitment. In what follows we provide support for each of the proposed relationships in our model.

Value congruence and identification

As we discussed earlier identification is, a 'cognitive state of self-categorization', driven by the process of comparison of personal and organizational attributes (Tajfel and Turner 1985; Bergami and Bagozzi 2000). Previous findings in the literature support a positive relationship between the degree of perceived similarities (values, personality, goals, etc.) between the employee and the organization and their level of identification (Kristof 1996; Bergami and Bagozzi 2000; Piasentin and Chapman 2006). Rokeach (1973) defined personal values as 'an enduring belief that a specific mode or conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode or conduct or end-state of existence.' The role of values and value congruence has been explored within the customer-brand context. Values form part of the identity of the brand and are important because they influence customers' degree of association with the brand and thus their attitudes and behaviours towards that brand (Lynch and de Chernatony 2007). In addition, empirical evidence from organizational context suggests the importance of organizational value congruence in influencing employees' identification with the organization and other important workplace outcomes (Arthur et al. 2006; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, and Johnson 2005; Piasentin and Chapman 2006). Previous research studies stress the important role that values play in forming self-identity and influencing attitudes and behaviours (Chatman 1989; Piasentin and Chapman 2006). More specifically, previous research suggests that the higher the employee-organization fit in terms of the congruence between their own values and the values of the organization, the higher their identification with the organization and performance, satisfaction and commitment to the organization (Chatman 1989; O'Reilly, Chatman, and Caldwell 1991). For example, Chatman (1989) found that value congruence between a person and his or her organization can predict individual satisfaction,

commitment, turnover and performance. Furthermore, Cable and DeRue (2002) postulate that employees who share their organization's values are more likely to identify with the organization and participate in supporting the causes of the organization. In a more recent work, Amos and Weathington's (2008) results suggest that perceived employee-organizational value congruence by employees is positively associated with satisfaction with their jobs and the overall organization.

Along the same lines, the issue of values and the potential influence of value congruence on salesperson behaviour and organizational outcomes have been given some research attention in the sales management literature. For example, Weeks, Chonko, and Kahle (1989) investigated the influence of perceptual congruence between salespeople and their sales managers on annual sales. The authors found significant association between performance congruence, value congruence and annual sales. In another study, Grant and Bush (1996) empirically supported the influence of different sales force socialization tactics in fostering value congruence. In a more recent study, Barnes et al. (2006) focused on the drivers of cultural strength and its influence on some important sales organization outcomes such as role stress, organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Furthermore, the authors report that salespeople's perceptual value congruency between their own values and those of their organization played an important mediating role in their model. However, the authors do not hypothesize or test for such relationships.

Within a service context, Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak (2009) draw on leadership and identity theories to investigate different managerial styles that influence brand-building behaviour from front-line employees. The authors argue that employee brand-building behaviour is an identity-congruent behaviour that is driven by a process of internalization (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Employees internalize the brand into their own self-concept when they perceive value congruence between their own values and the corporate brand's values. Their results indicate that driving customer-contact employees' brand-building behaviour through a process of internalization, compared to compliance, leads to a decrease in turnover intentions and an increase in supporting brand-building behaviour.

Along the same lines, salespeople's perceptions of the overlap (i.e., high level of congruence) between their own personal values and the brand and the company values might positively influence their degree of association with the brand and company they represent, which in turn positively influences their commitment, satisfaction and performance. A high fit between the salesperson's personal values and their perceptions of the brand and company values may result in increased likelihood that they will accept the values the brand and the company

stand for and that they identify with the brand and the company.

As such, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: Higher levels of salesperson brand value congruence will have a positive influence on salesperson brand identification.

Hypothesis 2: Higher levels of salesperson company value congruence will have a positive influence on salesperson company identification.

Brand and company identification

Applying previous research findings to our work, we propose a positive relationship between salesperson identification with the brand and identification with the company. Although the majority of research to date on organizational identification has focused on employees' identification with the organization as a whole, some recent research focuses on the importance of a broader conceptualization of identification at different organizational levels (e.g., Van Dick et al. 2004; Gautam, Van Dick, and Wagner 2004). Such research studies attempted to investigate employees' identification within different levels inside the organization such as teams or departments (e.g., Pratt and Foreman 2000; Van Dick et al. 2004; Bartels et al. 2007).

For example, Foreman and Whetten (2002) found that respondents identified with two identities in their organization: a business identity for the overall organization and a family identity for the branch they specifically belonged. In another study, Van Dick et al. (2004) examine the different targets of employee identification within an organization. The authors argue that an individual can identify with different levels inside the organization (i.e., team, department, strategic business unit or the organization as a whole). Furthermore, previous findings in this stream of research suggest that the stronger an employee identifies with one level in his or her organization, the stronger he or she will identify with other organizational levels (e.g., Bartels et al. 2006; Baruch and Winkelmann-Gleed 2002). According to Ashforth and Johnson (2001), there are both lower order identities (the brand in our study) and higher order identities (the overall company in our study). Ashforth and Johnson (2001) argue that these 'nested identities' form 'a means-end chain (March and Simon 1958) in that a given identity is both the means to a higher order identity and the end of a lower order identity' (32). That is, the brand is part of the overall company and high identification with the brand is likely to lead to high identification with the company as well.² Building on this reasoning, a higher level of salesperson's identification with the brand is likely to lead to higher level of identification with the company. For salespeople who highly identify with the brand they sell, organizational

identification is more likely to take place, because it provides them the basis for self-categorization (Turner 1975) and enhances their sense of belonging to and involvement with the company.

As such, we propose:

Hypothesis 3: Higher levels of salesperson brand identification will have a positive influence on salesperson company identification.

Identification and sales management outcomes

To begin with, we believe it is important to point out that identification researchers highlight the conceptual similarities and the importance of distinguishing between the different dimensions of organizational identification (i.e., cognitive component, affective component, evaluative component and behavioural component) and other affective, attitudinal and behavioural outcomes (i.e., organizational commitment, job satisfaction and performance) (e.g., Ashforth and Mael 1989; Bergami and Bagozzi 2000; Gautam, Van Dick, and Wagner 2004). For example, Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) stress the importance of differentiating identification as a 'cognitive state of self categorization' from its emotional, behavioural, or commitment-based consequences. Others agree that organizational identification and organizational commitment are two important conceptually related but distinct constructs (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Gautam, Van Dick, and Wagner 2004; Riketta 2005). A recent meta-analysis conducted by Riketta (2005), covering 96 studies, reported a significant amount of shared variance between both constructs. Ashforth and Mael (1989) theoretically differentiated the two concepts. The authors argue that while identification is self-referential, commitment is not. That is, identification contributes to a person's definition of who they are and therefore reflects 'the perceptions of oneness with or belongingness to an organization, where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) in which he or she is a member' (Mael and Ashforth, 1992, 104).

In this study, we adopt the cognitive conceptualization of identification (e.g., Ashforth and Mael 1989; Mael and Tetrick 1992; Bergami and Bagozzi 2000) and clearly link it to important outcomes within the sales management context. More specifically, to capture the influence of salesperson identification with the brand and the company, we chose the following important outcomes from the sales management literature: sales performance (both behavioural and outcome), job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Each of these is found to contribute to the overall productivity of a salesperson and effectiveness of the sales organization (Ingram et al. 2010). Based on the work of Oliver and Anderson (1994), performance has been studied relative to both salesperson measurable

outcome (e.g., sales, market share, new accounts and profitability) and subjective behaviours (e.g., making sales calls, adaptive selling, teamwork, sales presentations, sales planning and sales support activities). Job satisfaction is an important outcome in the sense that studies have shown that salespeople who find their jobs challenging, exciting and intrinsically satisfying are more committed to the organization and less likely to leave (Chen et al. 2011; Pettijohn, Pettijohn, and Taylor 2007). Lastly, a salesperson's level of organization commitment is indicative of his/her loyalty and willingness to put for extra effort in the role and the salesperson is likely to speak positively about his/her sales unit to others outside of the organization (Mowday, Steers, and Porter 1979).

Previous research empirically supports the premise that identification is an important driver of behaviours. Almost all research in identification points out to the positive consequences of people identification with organizations in terms of increasing their psychological attachment, caring about the organization and achievement of its goals and willingness to interact more positively with its members. SIT postulates that individuals with higher level of identification with an organization tend to engage in activities and behaviours that support the organization (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Mael and Ashforth 1992). Using SIT, Akerlof and Kranton (2000) demonstrated that people associate themselves with groups that they share similarities with and that such identification predicts the behaviours of the group members (Billig and Tajfel 1973; Turner 1975). Therefore, when an employee identifies with the organization, she/he is more likely to be satisfied and less likely to leave the organization.

In the organizational literature, there is support for the relationship between employee identification with the company and employee performance, satisfaction and commitment to the organization (e.g., Chatman 1989; O'Reilly, Chatman, and Caldwell 1991; Cable and DeRue 2002). Recently, King and Grace (2010) found that an employee's degree of psychological attachment or the feeling of belonging towards an organization positively influenced satisfaction, intentions to stay and positive behaviours that are 'above and beyond the norm', yet consistent with the brand premises of the organization. In the customer context, previous research has shown that consumers who identify with the organization are more likely to engage in behaviours supportive of the organization such as positive word of mouth (Ahearn, Bhattacharya, and Gruen 2005). In another recent research effort, Badrianarayana and Laverie (2011) empirically supported the influence of retail salespeople's identification with the manufacturer's brand on their brand advocacy behaviours.

Therefore, if the salesperson identifies with the brand she/he represents and feels connected with the brand, then

she/he is more likely to have higher level of behavioural and outcome performance. As such, we propose:

Hypothesis 4: Higher levels of salesperson brand identification will have a positive influence on salesperson behavior performance.

Hypothesis 5: Higher levels of salesperson brand identification will have a positive influence on salesperson outcome performance.

Wieseke et al. (2009) investigated the role of leadership within multiple level leader-follower relationships inside an organization and its influence on organizational identification of customer-contact employees. The authors found that customer-contact employees' organizational identification predicted their sales performance. Within a distributor (reseller) context, Hughes and Ahearn (2010) found that reseller salespeople identification with the manufacturer brand they represent positively influenced the salesperson's overall sales performance and brand extra role behaviours.

Based on all of this research on organization identification and its effects on sales outcomes, we suggest that higher levels of salesperson identification with the company should result in higher levels of satisfaction, organizational commitment and selling (behaviour and outcome) performance.

Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 6: Higher levels of salesperson company identification will have a positive influence on salesperson job satisfaction.

Hypothesis 7: Higher levels of salesperson company identification will have a positive influence on salesperson organizational commitment.

Hypothesis 8: Higher levels of salesperson company identification will have a positive influence on salesperson (a) behavior and (b) outcome performance.

Furthermore, we propose that SCI will mediate the influence of SBI on job satisfaction and organizational commitment. This proposition is consistent with the existing literature in which company identification plays an important mediating variable in employee-company relationships. Consistent with existing research in the organizational behaviour literature (e.g., Ashforth and Mael 1989; Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994), both job satisfaction and organizational commitment are key companywide related outcomes that are driven by the individual identification with their company. Identification causes employees to become psychologically attached to the company, motivating them to commit to the achievement of its goals and engage in extra role activities (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994). Furthermore, previous research suggest that identification can take place in a range of company relationships – from individual brands to corporate brand to company (e.g., Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2007; Van Dick et al. 2004). According to Ashforth

and Johnson (2001), there are both lower order identities (the brand in our study) and higher order identities (the overall company in our study). The authors (Ashforth and Johnson 2001) argue that these 'nested identities' form 'a means-end chain (March and Simon 1958) in that a given identity is both the means to a higher order identity and the end of a lower order identity' (32). Thus, the brand is part of the overall company and salesperson identification with the brand they sell can influence their overall job satisfaction and organizational commitment – as long as the salesperson identifies with the company.

Furthermore, this reasoning is consistent with findings within the sales management literature that some salespeople are primarily concerned with the affect or emotional states that come from selling and being associated with the sales organization. This includes pride, a sense of accomplishment, the feeling derived by doing worthwhile work and contributing to organizational goals to mention a few (Ingram et al. 2010). We would expect that any job satisfaction and organizational commitment impact would come by way of the salesperson feeling that he or she is being a good corporate citizen – identifying with the norms and policies of the company/organization. Doing so may serve to increase the salesperson's motivation, as he/she will be seen by the organization as a team player and supportive of management decision-making.

All these suggest a mediating role of company identification on the relationship between brand identification and company-level-related salesperson outcome (job satisfaction and organizational commitment).

Hypothesis 9a: The positive relationship between the salesperson brand identification and salesperson job satisfaction will be mediated by the salesperson identification with the company.

Hypothesis 9b: The positive relationship between the salesperson brand identification and salesperson organizational commitment will be mediated by the salesperson identification with the company.

The following sections describe the method used to measure and test this model and report the study findings.

Research methodology

Sample

An online survey was developed to collect the data. A sample of salespeople was provided a weblink allowing them to access and complete the survey. Salesperson participation in the study was solicited through a combination of researcher and student solicitation. The researchers generated approximately two-thirds of the sample from personal contacts with businesses associated with their university programme. This portion was represented by two firms, each of whose main product line was a distinct brand that was offered only through that particular firm. To test our model across a more general

population of salespeople, we expanded our sample to include a broader range of brands and firms. We did this by asking undergraduate students (for extra credit) to identify salespeople who would be willing to take the survey. For those agreeing to participate, a survey link was provided to them upon verifying that they met the necessary criteria of selling to get an order (versus to take an order as in the case of retail sales). This method accounted for the remaining third of our sample. To ensure that our sampling method as described was not biased or confounded our results, the model was run independently on both sub-samples. For the relationships hypothesized, no differences in results were detected.

In all, 246 completed the survey. The top industries represented were fashion, consumer appliances, manufacturing, business services and health care. Almost 76% of respondents were sales representatives while the remaining respondents were sales managers with selling experience. On average, study respondents are 33 years old and had about 11 years of selling responsibility. The average respondent had been employed at the firm for approximately seven years and had been involved with the brand in question over seven years. Almost 63% of the respondents were male.

Measures

Study constructs were measured using multi-item measures adopted from existing literature (see Appendix). Two items were adapted from Bergami and Bagozzi's (2000) measure of cognitive identification to measure both salesperson identification with the brand and salesperson identification with the company. On a 11-point scale anchored by strongly disagree and strongly agree, respondents were asked to respond to the following items: 'My sense of who I am overlaps with my sense of this brand (*company*),' 'My image overlaps with this brand's (*company's*) image'. As noted earlier, cognitive identification was used here following existing arguments in the literature for the importance of differentiating identification from its attitudinal, emotional and behavioural outcomes (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Mael and Tetrick 1992; Bergami and Bagozzi 2000). Two items were adapted from Money and Graham (1999) to measure respondents' perceived value congruence with their company. On a 11-point scale anchored by strongly disagree and strongly agree respondents were asked to respond to the following two items: 'Overall, values that are important to the company are important to me,' and 'Working for this company gives me the opportunity to strive for values in which I really believe'.

We adopted 21 items (see Appendix) from the Schwartz Values inventory (Schwartz 1992; Schwartz and Boehnke 2004) to measure both salespeople's personal values and their perceptions of brand values.³ We

measured personal values by asking respondents to indicate how important a given value is to them as a guiding principle in their life on a 11-point scale anchored by 1 'not at all important' and 11 'extremely important'. For respondents' perceptions of the brand values, we asked respondents to indicate to what extent this value characterizes the brand on a similarly anchored 11-point scale. To obtain value congruency scores we computed absolute difference scores between each brand value rating and its corresponding respondent value rating and then averaged all values for each respondent (Sirgy 1982; Sirgy et al. 1991; Sirgy, Grewal, and Mangleburg 2000). Furthermore, to obtain the final measure of value congruence we subtracted the index from 100 and multiplied it by -1 so that the larger values would indicate high level of congruity and vice versa.⁴ Multi-item measures were adapted from the sales literature to measure job satisfaction (Churchill, Ford, and Walker 1974), organizational commitment (Mowday, Steers, and Porter 1979), and behavioural and outcome performance (Piercy, Cravens, and Lane 2001).

To control for effects on *SBI*, we included three variables. *Brand distinction* was a two-item measure comprised of the items 'This brand has a distinctive identity' and 'This brand stands out from the competitor's brand'. *Brand attractiveness* was a two-item measure comprised of the items 'I like what this brand stands for' and 'This brand has an attractive identity'. Each of the aforementioned items were measured on a 11-point Likert scale (anchored by strongly disagree to strongly agree). The

third control variable, *salesperson's involvement with the brand*, was measured as the number of years reported as having been involved selling the brand. To control for variance of the *SCI* construct, we used a single measure of years the salesperson reported selling for his/her current company.

Analysis and results

Convergent validity of the model measures was confirmed by computing the average variance extracted (AVE). According to Fornell and Larcker (1981) convergent validity is judged to be adequate when AVE equals or exceeds 0.50. All AVE values for model variables fell within this range. Furthermore, all Cronbach alpha scores exceeded the .70 threshold recommended by Nunnally (1978) to ensure construct reliability (see Table 1 for measurement quality assessment results). Lastly, all measurement items had significant loadings on their corresponding constructs. This, combined with the acceptable composite reliability measures, indicates convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker 1981). To test discriminant validity, we conducted an analysis to ensure that each item is associated with only one construct; that is, no item loaded more highly on another construct than it did on the construct it intends to measure (Fornell and Larcker 1981; Green, Salkin, and Akey 2000). All single items' correlation (to its own scale) exceeded that of any of the other scales, thus demonstrating discriminant validity of the model constructs. To ensure against multicollinearity

Table 1. Means, standard deviation, and correlation among variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. BVCongr	1											
2. CVCongr	.29**	(.91)										
3. BrandID	.37**	.49**	(.88)									
4. CompID	.29**	.63**	.60**	(.82)								
5. BehPerf	-.03	.40**	.37**	.31**	(.84)							
6. OutPerf	.12*	.10*	.21*	.17*	.33**	(.79)						
7. JobSat	.19**	.63**	.39**	.47**	.54**	.21**	(.89)					
8. OrgComm	.28**	.82**	.48**	.68**	.46**	.12*	.70**	(.91)				
9. BrandDist	.19*	.38**	.38**	.26**	.40**	.09	.40**	.44**	(.93)			
10. BrandAttr	.22**	.46**	.43**	.31**	.41**	.06	.44**	.52**	.86**	(.94)		
11. YrsBrandInv	-.06	-.02	.13*	-.02	.01	.14*	-.06	-.05	-.03	.03	1	
12. YrsCoTenure	-.04	.07	.10*	.06	.04	.18*	.02	.03	.01	.07	.83**	1
Mean	98.10	8.89	7.68	7.99	9.58	7.46	8.93	8.75	9.11	9.24		
Std. Dev.	1.04	1.97	2.14	2.21	1.22	1.79	1.64	1.81	2.21	2.18		
Adj. R^2			.14	.51	.33	.08	.24	.65				
CR	1.00	.96	.94	.92	.90	.87	.92	.93	.96	.97		
AVE	1.00	.92	.89	.84	.75	.69	.75	.66	.93	.94		

Note: Numbers in the diagonal cells are Cronbach's alphas for study measures.

BVCongr = Salesperson-Brand Value Congruence; CVCongr = Salesperson-Company Value Congruence; BrandID = Salesperson-Brand Identification; CompID = Salesperson-Company Identification; BehPerf = Behavior Performance; OutPerf = Outcome Performance; JobSat = Job Satisfaction; OrgComm = Organizational Commitment; BrandDist = Brand Distinction; BrandAttr = Brand Attractiveness; YrsBrandInv = Years Involvement with Brand; and YrsCoTenure = Years with Company.* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

among variables, we examined the variance inflation factors (VIFs) across all variables. According to Hair et al. (1998), VIF index values less than 10.0 are acceptable, and for partial least squares (PLS) models, values less than 5.0 are recommended (Hair, Ringle, and Sarstedt 2011). Our measures met this criteria as the VIF scores ranged from 1.88 (SBI) to 4.66 (brand attractiveness). All other VIF index values fell within acceptable range. Based on this as well as on the checks for reliability and validity discussed, we conclude that the measures used in our study appropriately represent the constructs of interest.

SmartPLS (Ringle, Wende, and Will 2005) was used to estimate the measurement model and test the hypothesized path relationships using a (PLS) structural model (Anderson and Gerbing 1988; Joreskog and Sorbom 1984). PLS was used for several reasons. As is the case with our research goals, PLS is recommended (over covariance-based structural equation modelling) if the research is an extension of existing theory where key 'driver' constructs are used to predict model relationships (Hair, Ringle, and Sarstedt 2011). Our study meets these criteria in that we are extending identification theory to predict brand and company identification effects on outcomes in a sales domain. In addition, our model contains constructs measured by the salesperson's perception (of the brand and company), attitude (job satisfaction) and behaviour items (organizational commitment and performance). Researchers (e.g., Chin, Peterson, and Brown 2008; Peterson and Wilson 1992) advocate the use of PLS when estimating a model capturing such non-observable constructs comprised of attitudinal and behaviour measures. Lastly, our measure of value congruence (e.g., salesperson-company, salesperson-brand) is a formative index (computed to represent higher and lower levels of congruity). According to Hair, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2011), when formative constructs are a part of the structural model, PLS is an appropriate analysis method.

We used a standard bootstrapping procedure which involved repeated random sampling with replacement from the original sample. We chose a path weighting scheme where the number of bootstrap sample iterations was set at the default value of 300. From this, we were able to estimate a coefficient for each model path. From the standard error for each path model coefficient, a student's *t*-test was performed to measure the significance of path model relationships. The model fit and test of individual hypotheses was assessed by examining the magnitude (beta coefficient) and statistical significance (*t*-value) of the path estimates and construct R^2 values. These results have been incorporated into the model from Figure 1.

Estimates and testing of individual hypothesized path relationships suggest a very strong model fit. As expected, the path between SBVC and SBI was significant ($\beta = .30$, $p < .01$) as was the path between SCVC and SCI ($\beta = .44$,

$p < .01$). Subsequently, SBI and SCI were significantly related ($\beta = .39$, $p < .01$). The consequences side of the model supports significant path relationships between SBI and salesperson behaviour performance (BP) ($\beta = .30$, $p < .05$), SBI and salesperson outcome performance (OP) ($\beta = .29$, $p < .01$), SCI and salesperson job satisfaction (JS) ($\beta = .37$, $p < .01$), and SCI and salesperson organizational commitment (OC) ($\beta = .63$, $p < .01$).

The path between SCI and BP was not significant ($\beta = .13$) and neither was the relationship between SCI and OP ($\beta = -.04$). One potential reason for a lack of support for these two hypotheses may stem from the notion that salesperson performance is a function of a combination of factors – only some of which may be defined or impacted by the company as a whole. The sales literature shows that role perceptions (e.g., clarity, conflict, ambiguity), aptitude (e.g., cognitive ability, verbal intelligence, selling experience), skill (e.g., communication, product knowledge, sales process), motivation (e.g., willingness to put forth effort) and personal/organizational variables (e.g., age, careers stage, degree of supervision) collectively impacted salesperson performance (e.g., Verbeke, Dietz, and Verwaal 2011; Churchill, Ford, and Walker 1974). Few of these aforementioned factors are generally company specific. For example, a salesperson will develop role perceptions based on his/her selling position, title or relationship with the customer. Skills will be developed based on sales process and product training. Organizational variables will be heavily impacted by the sales supervisor who will utilize sales control systems to govern selling performance. Based on this, it is explainable why a salesperson's identification with the company may not have a significant direct impact on selling performance.

The model results also suggest a mediating role of SCI. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), a variable is said to mediate a relationship if the independent variable (IV) to mediating variable (MV) effect is significant and the MV to dependent variable (DV) relationship is significant. If the above two conditions are met, then full mediation occurs if the IV has no effect on the DV when the MV is controlled for. This case holds true for our model. Specifically, the direct SBI-JS and SBI-OC path relationships were not significant. However, the SBI-SCI-JS as well as the SBI-SCI-OC paths were significant, confirming full mediation effects (see Table 2 for a summary of our results).

The focus of our study was on investigating the antecedents and consequences of salesperson identification with the brand and company. Consequences centred on the sales constructs of performance (both outcome and behaviour), job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Although not hypothesized (doing so would extend the scope of our study), we wanted to at least acknowledge and address the relationships between these outcomes and the potential impact on our model.

Table 2. Model results.

Path	β -value	<i>t</i> -value	Comment
BVCongr → BrandId	.30	2.80**	H ₁ supported
CVCongr → CompId	.44	4.31**	H ₂ supported
BrandID → CompId	.39	3.48**	H ₃ supported
BrandID → BehPerf	.30	2.13*	H ₄ supported
BrandID → OutPerf	.29	2.35**	H ₅ supported
CompId → JobSat	.37	3.23**	H ₆ supported
CompId → OrgComm	.63	5.22**	H ₇ supported
CompId → BehPerf	.13	.99	H _{8a} not supported
CompId → OutPerf	−.04	−.35	H _{8b} not supported
BrandID → JobSat	.17	1.21	H _{9a} supported (full mediation)
BrandID → OrgComm	.10	.67	H _{9b} supported (full mediation)
<i>Control variables</i>			
BrandDist → BrandId	.03	.14	
BrandAttr → BrandId	.34	1.72*	
YrsBrandInv → BrandId	.14	1.92*	
YrsCoTenure → CompId	.01	.17	

Note: BVCongr = Salesperson–Brand Value Congruence; CVCongr = Salesperson–Company Value Congruence; BrandID = Salesperson–Brand Identification; CompID = Salesperson–Company Identification; BehPerf = Behavior Performance; OutPerf = Outcome Performance; JobSat = Job Satisfaction; OrgComm = Organizational Commitment; BrandDist = Brand Distinction; BrandAttr = Brand Attractiveness; YrsBrandInv = Years Involvement with Brand; and YrsCoTenure = Years with Company.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

The sales literature has been relatively consistent with agreement on how job satisfaction leads to higher levels of organizational commitment (Brown and Peterson 1993; Johnston et al. 1990; Williams and Hazer 1986). These arguments were constructed and confirmed based on the notion that job satisfaction is more specific, stable and more rapidly formed (cf. Williams and Hazer 1986) whereas organizational commitment requires an individual to reflect on his/her degree of satisfaction to derive attitudinal commitment (cf. MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Ahearne 1998). Given this, we tested the relationship between job satisfaction and organizational commitment in our model. As expected, this relationship was positive and significant ($\beta = .49$, $p < .01$). Although job satisfaction has received considerable attention in the literature, the study of its relationship with performance has shown mixed results (Pettijohn, Pettijohn, and Taylor 2007). For example, Harris, Mowen, and Brown (2005) found a positive relationship between customer-oriented sales behaviours (i.e., behaviour performance) and job satisfaction while McNeilly and Goldsmith (1991) found that the performance–job satisfaction relationship was moderated by the skill level of the salesperson. To add to this murkiness, alternative studies of the performance–job

satisfaction relationship (e.g., Brown and Peterson 1994; McNeilly and Goldsmith 1991; Shipley and Kiely 1986; Simantiras and Lancaster 1991) have provided contradictory findings.

In light of these studies, we tested the relationship between performance (both behaviour and outcome) and job satisfaction. Consistent with some of the previous research studies, we found a positive significant relationship between behaviour performance and job satisfaction ($\beta = .43$, $p < .01$). The same relationship did not hold true for outcome performance ($\beta = .01$). This latter finding may be a function that the performance level of the salesperson (McNeilly and Goldsmith 1991) may be a moderating influence in this relationship. For the most part, and consistent with some of the prior sales research studies, our sample provides similar findings relative to the interrelationships among these four outcome variables studied. In addition, by modelling the relationships among consequence variables, our original hypothesized results did not change.

Discussion and managerial implications

In summary, our study findings suggest that the higher the perceived congruence between salespeople's own values and the values of the brands and the companies they represent, the higher their identification with these brands and companies. Furthermore, our findings support the significant positive effects of salespeople's identification with the brands and companies they represent on their satisfaction, commitment and behavioural and outcome performance. These findings are relevant for both academics and practitioners. From a theoretical perspective, we shed light on the concept of brand value congruence and its effect on salesperson identification with the brand and key outcomes of salesperson–brand relationships in the context of sales management. To our knowledge, this is one of the few studies to explore this within the sales management context. Furthermore, our results are supportive of the SIT-based findings made in the branding literature about the capacity of consumers to identify with brands; our findings suggest that salespeople identify with the brands they represent as well. Moreover, we found that such brand identification could be driven by salespeople's perception about the degree of congruence between their own values and the values of the brands they represent.

Our results are consistent with some of the recent findings in the literature with regard to the importance of internal customer groups such as salespeople in the ultimate success of brands with external customers. For example, Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak (2009) found that driving customer-contact employees' brand-building behaviour through a process of compliance, compared to internalization, leads to an increase in turnover intentions and a decrease in supporting brand-building behaviour.

Our findings point out to a key antecedent of how to improve sales force identification with the brands and the companies they represent, which leads to improved performance, job satisfaction and commitment to the organization. One way in which companies can improve salesperson internalization with the brands they represent is through highlighting the identity and values that the brand stands for to promote salespeople to assimilate and identify with what the brands stand for.

From a practical viewpoint, the importance of examining salesperson identification with the brands represented and its antecedents stems from the fact that salespeople tend to represent the brand and act as the brand ambassadors in front of external entities such as customers (Harris and de Chernatony 2001). Customer perceptions of the organization and its brands may in fact be significantly influenced by perceptions of the personality of the salesperson representing that brand and organization (de Chernatony 1999). Salespeople are in direct contact with customers, and customers' perceptions about the brand values are largely influenced by salespeople's actions and behaviours. Therefore, in terms of practical implications, our findings allow management to really appreciate what is involved in influencing salesperson identification with the brand and the company. In particular, the positive significant influence of salespeople's brand value congruence on their brand identification suggests that management must take in consideration salespeople-brand value congruence seriously in their salesperson recruiting, motivation and evaluation decisions.

Higher levels of salesperson identification with the brand, satisfaction and commitment to the company should increase performance and simulate the salesperson's support to the brand in front of the customer. Salespeople have an important role in the way customers perceive the brand and thus it is very important for the company to build a culture among salespeople that fosters the values of the brand and the company to make sure that management gets the sales force's support in transferring the brand values to customers. Furthermore, achieving higher levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment in the sales force is a very important outcome that is not only beneficial in improving sales performance and the cost of maintaining the sales force but is key in improving sales force retention and sustaining stability in customer-brand experience delivered by the sales force.

Our findings should also help brand and sales managers maximize selling performance and retention/development of their sales resources via salesperson recruitment and selection strategies. For example, incorporation of value testing in the salesperson selection/interview process can serve to identify whether candidates are likely to identify with the brand and/or company. A strong match between salesperson values and those

perceived of the brand may be a good indicator as to how a salesperson will perform in the role. It is very important for salespeople to understand what values the brand stands for and how that relates to their roles so that, in turn, they can deliver the brand premise in their interaction with customers (Punjaisri and Wilson 2007). Likewise strong brand identification should help foster company identification which shows to facilitate strong job satisfaction and organizational commitment. The implication of these latter two effects could save the company valuable resources in terms of lower levels of turnover and higher retention of salespeople. Given that SCI has both direct and mediating effects on critical sales organizational outcomes, managers should ensure that sales force training highlights the core values of the brand as well as the company and provides opportunities for salespeople to relate company and brand core values to their own.

Limitations and directions for future research

Like other research, there are several limitations to this study, many of which can be addressed in future research. It was important for our subjects to differentiate between the company and the brand when they answer the survey and that they specifically address the brand questions from one brand point of view especially if they might be involved with more than one brand. As such, our survey was carefully designed into different subsections to clearly separate questions related to own personality from brand personality, and company-related questions, and/or overall sales management outcomes. In addition, at the beginning of the brand questions subsection each subject was asked to write down a brand that they are most involved in selling and were instructed to base all their answers related to the brand personality based on that brand. However, it is interesting to see if salespeople might identify differently with different brands that their company is selling, specially for firms with multiple brands. Future research is encouraged to further explore sales people identification across multiple brands within the company brand portfolio.

Another potential limitation of our study relates to our focus on 5 values of the original 10 values included in Schwartz (1992) inventory that are relevant within the sales management context (see endnote number 2). Although this might have not impacted our results given that we use an indirect derived measure to capture value congruence at the aggregate level, future research is encouraged to examine other sets of values and explore potential value congruence effects at specific value level. Furthermore, our study could be criticized for the use of a two-item scale adapted from Money and Graham (1999) to measure SCVC. However, multiple examples of the use of two- or three-item scales could be found in the

literature (for recent examples, see Van Dick et al. 2004; Bartels et al. 2007; Carlson, Donavan, and Cumiskey 2009). Furthermore, several researchers argue for the use of more parsimonious scales for their ease of use and simplicity (Nunnally and Bernstein 1994; Bearden and Netemeyer 1998; Bergkvist and Rossiter 2007).

Another limitation of our study relates to the self-report nature of the measures used to assess salespeople perceptions of their own values and the values of the brand along with other work outcomes (e.g., behavioural and outcome performance, job satisfaction, organizational commitment). Using such measures may have created the potential for common method variance that could have inflated the relationships between constructs. However, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) containing all constructs would have produced a one-factor solution if common method variance was an issue. Since that was not the case and our model fit was good, we have no reason to suspect that common method variance was an issue. Future research is encouraged to replicate our findings using more objective measures to assess salesperson performance or job satisfaction.

This paper builds on the literature on customer identification with brands and employee identification with their organizations – and focuses on some antecedents and outcomes of salesperson identification with the brand and company. Clearly, another important next step for future research is to investigate other factors that influence salesperson identification with the brand and the company they represent. Previous research in consumer brand identification literature suggest congruence on personality traits between the brand and the consumer enhance identification (e.g., Aaker 1997; Carlson, Donavan, and Cumiskey 2009). Future research for example can address the role that personality congruence plays in influencing salesperson identification with the brands they represent.

We focused our study on examining sales management relevant consequences of salesperson brand and company identification such as salesperson satisfaction, commitment and performance. Scholars argue the role that employees play in representing the brand and how that reflects on brand performance (e.g., Harris and de Chernatony 2001; Hughes and Ahearne 2010). Another idea for future research involves studying brand performance or customer-related outcomes of salesperson identification with the brands and companies they represent. For example, future research could investigate whether higher levels of salesperson identification with the brands they represent are transformed to measurable customer outcomes in terms of higher brand loyalty and customer satisfaction. Another idea for future research is to study the influence of higher salesperson identification with the brands they represent on their brand-building behaviours.

Our work focuses on the positive outcomes of value congruence of salespeople with the brands and companies

they represent. The alignment of salesperson values with the values of the brand and the company they represent is important, since any potential difference could result in inconsistent behaviour by the sales force that is detrimental to the brand in the customer's eyes (de Chernatony, Drury, and Segal-Horn 2004). What if salespeople do not identify with the values of the brand they represent? Is it possible that salespeople who do not identify with a brand or a company are better able to anticipate and handle any objections from the customer? Also, since salespeople are used as a source of information about the market, if selection is limited to those who share brand values, only affirming information might be received, which might negatively influence the ability of the organization to learn.

Different employees' perceptions of brand values are likely to differ depending on their functional background, their position inside the organization and their tenure with the organization, among others (Harris and de Chernatony 2001; DelVecchio 1998). Indeed, research has shown that managers' perceptions of the organization may differ from those of sales staff (DelVecchio 1998). Future research needs to address these issues.

Notes

1. Social identity theory as conceptualized by Tajfel and Turner (1985) refers to 'social identity' as identification with social categories/groups (i.e., category-based identification). It is worth noting that other variations of identity theory exist in the social psychology literature; for example, Stryker and colleagues' conceptualization of identity theory focused on understanding how role-based identities (i.e., role-based identification) within social structures affect self and how self affects social behaviours. Other different but related conceptualization of identity theory by Burke and colleagues focused on the internal processes of self-verification as they affect social behaviour. For detailed discussion of the different variations of identity theory, see Stryker and Burke (2000), Stets and Burke (2000) and Hogg, Terry, and White (1995).
2. It is worth noting that Ashforth and Johnson also argue that 'organizational identities provide psychological framework for individual members' (34). This suggests that the relationship between SBI and SCI may also be of reversed causality. This might be particularly relevant in mergers or brand acquisition conditions.
3. Schwartz Values inventory consists of 46 items measuring 10 different human values including hedonism, stimulation, universalism, tradition, security, benevolence, conformity, power, achievement and self-direction. The 21 items we used in our study are relevant to the last five values above. The research team, including two researchers with intensive sales management experience, selected this subset of five values from Schwartz scale that are more relevant within the sales context.
4. Since value congruence at the company level has been widely researched in the literature and the focus of our paper was on salespeople-brand congruence, we use a direct measure to capture company-salespeople value congruence and an indirect measure to assess brand-salespeople value

congruence. Both approaches are viable and frequently used in the literature [see Kristof (1996) for a detailed discussion of direct and indirect measures of person-organization fit and the suitability of using both approaches].

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Appendix: Study measures

Salesperson–Brand Value

I feel that an important guiding principle in my life is ... I feel that the following characterizes this brand ...

Benevolence (loyalty, honesty, helpfulness)
 Conformity (politeness, self-discipline, showing respect for others)
 Power (control over others, dominance, wealth, authority)
 Achievement (hardworking, aspiring, confident, effective, efficient)
 Self-direction (adventure seeking, risk, freedom, creativity, independent, curious)

Salesperson–Company Value Congruence

Overall, values that are important to the company are important to me
 Working for this company gives me the opportunity to strive for values in which I really believe

Salesperson–Brand Identification

I feel that my self-image overlaps with *this brand's* image
 My sense of who I am overlaps with my sense of *this brand*

Salesperson–Company Identification

I feel that my self-image overlaps with *my company's* image
 My sense of who I am overlaps with my sense of *my company*

Behavior Performance

I listen attentively to identify and understand the real concerns of my customers
 I communicate my sales presentations clearly and concisely
 I work out solutions to a customer's questions or objections

Outcome Performance

I make sales of those products with the highest *profit margins*
 I generate a high level of *dollar sales*
 I exceed all of my sales targets and objectives

Job Satisfaction

My job is never dull and monotonous
 My job gives me a sense of accomplishment
 I am satisfied with my job

Organizational Commitment

I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond that normally expected in order to help my organization be successful
 I talk up my organization to my friends as a great organization to work for
 I am proud to tell others that I am part of this organization